The Reality of Change: The Re-Professionalization of the U.K. Police

This paper will examine the re-professionalization of policing; the unravelling of the old ‘occupational closure’ model and its problematic replacement with a white-collar, managerialised, harm reduction, vulnerability reduction, knowledge based model. Data from an ethnographic study of a U.K. police force will seek to highlight the reality of the impact of such change on operational outcomes and its consequences.

Austerity, staff cuts and a series of scandals around police mismanagement of child sexual exploitation cases, historic sexual abuse, mental health related deaths in custody and domestic violence outcomes have led to external, politicised criticism of the police’s ability to deal with the challenges of modern day policing, in particular the operational practicalities of dealing with those most vulnerable in society. To address cultural and operational barriers to this new agenda, a top down professionalization programme has seen the imposition of national priorities and practice standards, monitored and facilitated by revamped and enhanced external scrutiny, inspection and training bodies.

Data from interviews with operational police officers and observations of daily work in a metropolitan force will highlight the consequences of change on routine work, namely; the loss of professional discretion and traditional experienced based knowledge; the loss of investigative and proactive skills; problems with leadership and decision making at critical incidents; risk averse actions dictated by bureaucratic instruments and a general loss of personal identity. Examples of significant injustice and incompetence show police failure to protect those most at risk.

De-skilled and demotivated, officers struggle to see the positive value of the new agenda espoused by strategic managers. They work in an organisation seemingly in a state of paralysis and with no clear understanding of their role and purpose. Contrary to views within the sociology of policing that the fundamentals of the police role remain unchanged, the daily routine of modern policing indicate a fundamental shift in activity and requirements, the outcomes of which challenge the management, values and integrity of policing’s professionalization agenda.